



A GROUNDINGS DISCUSSION ON THE KOREAN STRUGGLE: BEHIND THE PROPAGANDA

by D. MUSA SPRINGER &
DEREK R. FORD

INTRODUCTION

Before a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 29, 2024, U.S. Air Force General Anthony J. Cotton emphasized that U.S. imperialism faces the biggest challenges in its history: “We are confronting not one but two nuclear peers: the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China,” he stated.¹ As part of his plea for more than 100 B-2 nuclear-capable bombers, he clarified that what is more dangerous than the growing military capacity of Russia and China is “the growing relationships” between the two, Iran, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea).

Perhaps without knowing it, Cotton did state a fact: the DPRK’s nuclear program is intended “to ensure regime survival and influence Republic of Korea and U.S. forces in the area.” In other words, it exists to defend the country’s independence and sovereignty against the U.S.

Cotton neglected to mention that the U.S. spends more on its military than the combined total of the next 10 countries,² although in a February 15, 2024 interview he conceded the DPRK “doesn’t have the capability or capacity of Russia or China.”³ Cotton, the rest of the Pentagon, politicians, and mainstream media couple this with accusations of the DPRK’s increasingly “aggressive rhetoric” against the U.S., without mentioning the DPRK has a “no-strike first” policy, unlike the U.S.

As the possibility of war increases and as

1 Clark, Joseph, ‘Military Leaders Say Maintaining U.S. Strategic Edge Requires Continued Investment’, *DOD-News*.

2 Peter G. Peterson Foundation, ‘Chart Pack: Defense Spending’.

3 Eliason, William T., ‘An Interview with Anthony J. Cotton’, *National Defense University Press*.

Trump recently renewed the travel ban preventing U.S. citizens from visiting the DPRK, *Peace, Land, and Bread* is publishing the following updated and slightly modified transcript of an episode of the *Groundings* podcast series.⁴ The episode was initially prompted after the guest, Derek R. Ford, led the last U.S. peace delegation to the DPRK in August 2017, just before the U.S. imposed a ban prohibiting its citizens from traveling to the northern part of Korea. Like all episodes, however, the host D. Musa Springer doesn't interview Ford but rather engages in a "groundings" discussion.

"Groundings" is named after the revolutionary praxis of Walter Rodney, who democratized knowledge by breaking barriers between the "academy" and the streets. As Springer writes in their description of the series, "Groundings: we sit, we listen, we talk, we share, and we learn." Springer and Ford cover a range of issues, from the modern history of Korea, Ford's trips to the north and south, the evolution of the Juche ideology and its global appeal, and other key topics that each break through the overwhelming U.S. propaganda against the DPRK.

Springer is a cultural worker, community organizer, and journalist from Atlanta. They are the International Youth Representative for Cuba's *Red Barrial Afrodescendiente*, an editor at Hood Communist, and a longtime member of the Walter Rodney Foundation.⁵ As a journalist they have reported on the prison and other grassroots struggles, and produced several documentaries, including, *Parchman Prison: Pain & Protest* (2020). Springer is assistant editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Pamoja* and their book, *Alive & Paranoid*, is available through Iskra Books.

Springer's interlocutor, Ford, is an organizer, teacher, and educational theorist. They organize with the Indianapolis Liberation Center and the ANSWER Coalition, serve as co-coordinator

of Free Shaka Shakur, and teach at DePauw University, where they created and continue to lead the only U.S. university exchange program with Chongryon Korea University in Japan. In addition to books and other popular and academic publications, Ford has published on the Korean struggle in the *Journal of Korea University*, *Choson Sinbo*, *Uriminzokkiri* (the sister paper of the Workers' Party of Korea), *International Magazine*, *No Cold War*, and elsewhere, including the foreword to *Socialist Education in Korea* (Iskra Books, 2022).

THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA BEYOND PROPAGANDA

DEREK FORD: Hey, thanks for having me so much, Musa.

MUSA: So, you first traveled to North Korea, AKA the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK, last summer. Am I correct?

DEREK: Yes, we went in early August 2017, just after the Trump administration announced the travel ban on U.S. citizens visiting the DPRK but just before it went into effect. We were the last group of U.S. citizens in the country. I organized a Korea Peace Tour delegation with four other people, all traveling on U.S. Passports. Although one member, my friend who has been to the DPRK hundreds of times but was born in South Korea and is the only person born there to teach at Kim Il Sung University. He's not allowed back in South Korea at this moment in time and has been exiled from South Korea because of his peace work on and off since the 1980s. Like all activists in the South, he was tortured and imprisoned by the Korean equivalent of the CIA. We were hosted by a new media organization in the country that's an independent organization, which means that it's independent of any political parties, including the Workers' Party of Korea, and the state apparatus itself. We

4 This and other episodes are available at <https://groundings.simplecast.com>.

5 <https://www.walterrodneyfoundation.org/>.

were able to travel freely and had pre-arranged talks with scholars, farmers, students, scientists, workers, and soldiers that were informal.

MUSA: As someone who is on the left and is a well-studied organizer, did you still have preconceived notions, or a thin layer of propaganda that you arrived with?

DEREK: Definitely. As critical as I am of the media, the only information I had of the country, people, and history was filtered through others, including many with deep roots in the Korean struggle and who were Korean. Nonetheless, I had certain gaps left unexamined.

I will note two. The first was the remarkable objectivity of the official tour guides. We went on structured tours for museums, for example. It was here that the level of objectivity displayed by the guides and escorts was truly remarkable. For example, I spoke multiple times with the soldier who escorted us to the demilitarized zone, which is where the talks between the North and South were happening at the time of our initial interview and where negotiations between the DPRK, China, the U.N. Command, and U.S. Forces occurred during the war against Korea. As we approached the border, the guide said to us, "what we're going to show you is what happened according to our perspective. And we just want you to try to put yourself in our shoes and try to understand where we're coming from."

It was the same thing at the newly renovated Sinchon Museum of U.S. War Crimes commemorating the Sinchon massacre of Koreans by U.S. forces. There, the tour guide said to us, "we're going to tell you the history of the war from our perspective, and we ask that you take this into account and make up your own mind." Even scholars like Bruce Cummings who are critical of the U.S. and widely studied in the DPRK and at Korea University, give the impression such tours are ridiculous and over-the-top propaganda efforts where you are told: "the DPRK has never done anything wrong" and,

you know, "look at all these atrocities" with their overblown narratives. That wasn't the case at all.

MUSA: I don't mean to interrupt, but I think that propaganda narrative goes much deeper than just scholars and writers. One of the most controversial, but most popular movies a few years ago, starred James Franco and Seth Rogen and the entire premise was North Korea was showing people fake restaurants, fake religious spots, and fake towns. The whole premise of the movie was that it was a fake tour that they were taken on to make them fall in love with North Korea. I've even seen CNN and MSNBC commentators talking about how when Dennis Rodman went there, he was only shown "one side of the country." This narrative is definitely very deeply ingrained.

DEREK: And it serves to ultimately, discount, ahead of time, anyone's actual experiences there. If you say something positive about North Korea or defend it in any way, people say, "how would you know, you've never been there." And I can say, "actually I have been there." Yet this framing allows my experiences to be rejected outright, because "yeah, but you didn't really see everything, just what they wanted you to see." Not to mention, I'm pretty sure the entire state and military apparatuses had much more important matters to attend to than orchestrating millions of people for the sake of a handful of U.S. citizens—the arrogance!

We spent a lot of time in Pyongyang, which since the 5th century was the capital of Korea. During Japanese rule, Pyongyang was developed around maintaining colonialism. As Zorica Pogrmic Bojan Djerčan wrote, after 1953 it was rebuilt from scratch under socialist ideology and the Juche idea.⁶ It is highly developed and organized along polycentric lines, where there are several centers rather than just one. There we saw the equivalent of a five-star hotel in the U.S., but we also saw people living in makeshift housing in the countryside and di-

6 Zorica, Pogrmic, and Bojan, Djerčan. "Urban Development of Pyongyang under the Influence of Juche Idea."

lapidated housing throughout the country. Yet they were very proud to show us everything, just as proud of what they continue to rebuild in the countryside and cooperative farmer housing in Migok Cooperative Farm as they were of the new science research center in Pyongyang.

This illuminates the Juche ideology or philosophy that, among other things, guides the country's foreign policies. People in the media are always saying we don't know anything about the DPRK and that it's irrational and unpredictable, but in reality, their government's behavior is incredibly consistent and measured, based on a particular kind of rationality.

MUSA: Well, I was just going to say, I think that along with the government's actions and rationality being extremely consistent, it's also very transparent. There are official DPRK websites that put out news briefs, daily updates and information about tourism, e-libraries for reading, and educational materials about their country. And there are pages that explain the Juche ideology, for example. So along with it being predictable, it's also fairly transparent, especially compared to other countries. We sometimes know a lot less about the U.S. Government or Western governments than places like the DPRK, which provides a good deal of information on the internet.

DEREK: That's true. Now, given the U.S. is still at war and can return to full-scale bombings at any moment, there is obviously certain information that we can't access, which disturbs the colonial mindset of many. Still, they are transparent in many ways and there are numerous objective scholarly sources on the country, its history, politics, and culture. The problem is even these sources are not understood outside of the dominant and *dominating* singular imperialist narrative of "the other" that is the DPRK.

MUSA: Would you say there's a double standard that takes place? I know that when tourists come to New York City, for example, or they come to the West Coast and go to LA and Hol-

lywood, they tend to only gravitate to the parts of the city that are attracted to tourists, that are "developed," that have five-star hotels and large theaters and arenas. I don't know any tourist who comes to the U.S. and actively seeks out impoverished areas or areas where there have been decades of structural racism that now has it looking terrible and demolished and you know, all these various things. I think there's an interesting double standard. Would you agree with that?

DEREK: Certainly. There are places in the U.S. you can't visit. They don't take foreign tourists to military installations or prisons. When talking about my trip there, I always emphasize that I'm from the U.S., the country that destroyed Korea between 1950 and 1953, carpet bombed it for years, and still maintains a first-strike nuclear policy against the DPRK (while the DPRK maintains a policy of defensive or retaliatory nuclear weapon use). It's understandable and logical for North Korea to determine my movements within or entry into their country; it's *their* country. The idea that any person should have unfettered access to anywhere in the world comes from a mindset framed by colonialism. Everyone should respect North Korea's sovereignty, and that includes their management of tourism, an incredibly destructive industry that has and continues to ravage oppressed nations. It's a safeguard against the chauvinistic destruction that so many, especially American, tourists engage in upon oppressed and formerly colonized nations. When you come in peace and friendship, that is not the case. If I walked into the Pink Houses in New York City, started antagonizing people, proceeded to try and steal a cherished heirloom, and got badly beaten as a result, that's my fault!

MUSA: Definitely, and tourism is an extremely colonial structure. I'm from the Caribbean islands. Tourism generates a lot of money, but never for the people who it's largely impacting. Another point you made was the U.S. War aggressions against Korea. Because to me it would

be justified if there wasn't objectivity and was more of a subjective appeal to emotion, given the fact that your entire country was carpet bombed by 630,000 tons of explosives. So, you mentioned the Juche ideology. Can you talk a little bit more about that and what you saw firsthand, as well as your understanding of the ideology?

DEREK: Juche is predominantly translated as "self-reliance" and its English transliteration is "one body." I always thought a more accurate and comprehensive translation was "subject-hood," and people and officials in the DPRK as other citizens of the North, like those in Japan, agreed. If you were to say, for example, that the proletariat—which always included colonized people—is a subject of history, that means that it's the struggle of classes—broadly construed—that makes history in a given moment. That's what Juche means. In the circumstances of Korea, it means the Korean masses, and not the Japanese or U.S. governments, make Korean history.

Just like the roots of the North are in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism, so too is the Juche idea. Korea was an independent unified nation for thousands of years, united by a common language, culture, traditions, customs, economic relations, and of course contiguous territory. Japan colonized Korea formally in 1910 after launching an offensive in 1890 and subjected the continent to the brutality of colonialism. The Japanese enslaved Koreans and brought them to Japan by force, kidnapping, and lying. They were given Japanese names and forbidden to speak Korean or practice their cultural traditions, from culinary practices to dance and musical forms of expression. It was the same for the enslaved Koreans in Japan. Many descendants of Korean slave laborers still live in Japan, fighting to live as Koreans in Japan and working for the reunification of the peninsula.⁷ Most, around 90 percent, came from what is now

South Korea.

There's a theory that Japan even changed the English spelling of the country from "Corea" to "Korea" so it would come *after* Japan in the alphabet!

There was, as always, resistance. Kim Il Sung, who is credited as the founder of the DPRK, was a particularly important resistance fighter. His family members were resistance fighters, and after his father's death, Kim vowed to continue that legacy. In high school, he was expelled for organizing walkouts and protests. After enrolling in a nationalist resistance school and finding its ideology wanting, he founded the Down with Imperialism League (later renamed the Anti-Imperialist Youth League), and the Koreans trace the origins of Juche to a June 1930 meeting of the Anti-Imperialist Youth League and the Communist Youth League. There Kim urged the unification of the two groups and articulated the need to not only overthrow Japanese rule but build a communist Korea by uniting peasants and workers. In his introduction to *Juche! The Speeches and Writings of Kim Il Sung*, Li Yuk-sa writes—in accordance with other Korean accounts—that at that meeting Kim said, "it is absolutely impossible to achieve independence with foreign aid" and that "the only way is for us Koreans to fight and defeat the Japanese imperialists by our own strength."⁸

The formal argument of Juche and its adoption as state policy came in 1955, with a famous December 28 speech Kim gave to Party Propagandists and Agitators. A lot happened between 1930 and 1955. The Communist Party of Korea was formed officially in 1925 but was dissolved the next year. At the advice of the Third International, Kim and the communists formed a united front with the Chinese fighters in the area in their joint struggle based in Manchuria against the Japanese. Some estimate the majority of the Chinese Party in the area at that time

7 Ford, Derek R. "Chongryon."

8 Li, "Introduction," 9.

was primarily Korean because of their successful efforts to recruit peasants there. Yet some Chinese fighters, the nationalists, were anti-communists as were some Korean nationalists, and they betrayed the communists and murdered many of their comrades, as Kim recalls in his 1945 speech, "On the Building of New Korea and the National United Front."

There was also the tragic "Minsaengdan incident," which refers to a pro-Japanese infiltration into the Korean resistance struggle. As Kim writes about in the 4th volume of a collection of compiled speeches, *Kim Il Sung with the Century*:

The 'Minsaengdan' was the product of the intellectual development of the Japanese imperialists' colonial rule of Korea. They had set up the 'Minsaengdan' to undermine the Korean revolution through stratagem and trickery. Failing in their attempt to rule over Korea with guns and swords and in the guise of a 'civil government,' fussing about 'Japan and Korea being one' and being of 'the same ancestry and the same stock,' the Japanese imperialists aimed at brewing fratricide among the Koreans to destroy the revolutionary forces and to resolve their worries in the maintenance of peace.⁹

He writes that around 100 Minsaengdan suspects became leading fighters in the Korean struggle. The efforts to rid the struggle of such infiltrators turned into what he calls an "ultra-Leftist struggle" that killed many unjustly and "caused great damage to our revolution."¹⁰ Between 1932 and 1935, at least a thousand Korean communists were killed by their Chinese comrades. The highest estimates are about 2000 to 2,500. Kim himself was almost killed, escaping partly because no one could deny his commitment to Korean independence. Throughout the Chinese Revolution and the existence of the Third International, the Koreans had to maintain independence between both entities while not alienating either.

MUSA: To contextualize this on a larger, more global scale, this is in the late '40s and we have decolonial movements that are pretty much

being waged all across the world, particularly across several African nations and a few Caribbean islands as well. Am I correct?

DEREK: Absolutely.

MUSA: Okay. I just want to situate that in a larger context to draw out that this is congruent with and in conversation with larger, decolonial struggles that are happening, as well as borderline socialist and socialist uprisings taking place in areas like Ghana and Cuba. So, Korea finds itself situated in what is turning into a split and deteriorating relationship between the two large socialist superpowers.

DEREK: Exactly. When Stalin died, there was an internal struggle in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. There was a lot of instability, and this is when some anti-Soviet revolts flared up, like in Hungary. Counterrevolutionaries were trying to seize this instability. Khrushchev emerges as a leader in 1955 and 1956. He's the first secretary of the CPSU at this point, and he begins to articulate a theory of peaceful coexistence, which is the idea that the Soviet Union and the U.S. can peacefully coexist; it's an olive branch to the U.S.

Yet the People's Republic of China had just had their revolutionary victory, while the Soviet's Bolshevik Revolution was back in 1917. A new generation was emerging in the Soviet Union that wasn't necessarily grounded in the revolutionary struggle, whereas in China there was still a very real revolutionary ethos. There were a series of debates over particular policies and criticisms of particular policies that went back and forth between China and the Soviet Union.

That is all proper and important, but this generated into a state-to-state conflict when the Chinese ended up characterizing the Soviet Union's social system as social imperialist. On the other hand, the Soviets signed the im-

9 *Kim Il Sung with the Century* (Vol. 4), 13.

10 *Ibid.*, 9.

perialist nuclear arms deal that threatened the Chinese Revolution by restricting its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The struggle between the two became so intense that in 1960, the Khrushchev leadership recalled all Soviet technicians from China who were playing a critical role in the economic development projects modernizing the country. In the Worker's Party of Korea, which emerged in 1948 through the coalescing of a couple of different communist groups with Kim Il Sung's leadership, there were pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese groupings. There were really important questions debated: Where would the party stand on the ideological struggle between the two forces? What country would they develop economic ties with to rebuild the country? The state was geographically and politically caught in the middle of this fight. Ultimately, the North Koreans needed assistance and cooperation from both the USSR and the People's Republic of China, but they didn't want to be dictated to by either of these socialist giants. They made a sort of quid pro quo arrangement for aid and trade. The situation came to a head in 1956 in February, when Khrushchev made his secret speech at the 20th Congress where he repudiated Stalin and his legacy, partly by chalking it up to a "cult of personality" that could be read as a critique of the DPRK.

MUSA: It wasn't just an intra-party struggle, right?

DEREK: Yes, or rather both intra- and inter-party. The struggle continued after the formation of the DPRK, as the Party included pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions. Kim noted in 1955 that still many Koreans knew more about Chinese and Soviet history than they did about Korean history, which manifested in politics and realms such as literature and the arts.¹¹ Juche was, at least initially, formulated as a clarification of Marxism-Leninism. "Marxism-Leninism is not a dogma; it is a guide to action and a creative

theory," he said, so it "can display its indestructible vitality only when it is applied creatively to suit the specific conditions of each country." Remember that this was during the emerging Sino-Soviet split, and the fact that Korea remained an independent line throughout was quite significant and no doubt played a key role in their ability to survive beyond the Soviet Union and overthrow of the Eastern Bloc socialist countries.

Kim spent a summer in the USSR during this period. During this time, the pro-Soviet faction and pro-China factions of the WPK conspired to depose Kim at an upcoming Central Committee meeting. While he was gone, the official newspaper of the party's Central Committee ran a column endorsing the errors of the Stalin era, including the cult of personality. When the plenary happened, however, both factions were shouted down by the rest of the central committee because these factions were looking to the USSR and China not just for economic support but also for things like culture. They argued that Korean culture was backwards, and they had to embrace Soviet or Chinese dressing styles. Because Korea is a nation with, thousands of years of history, the portrayal of Korean culture as backwards or somehow inadequate led even more people to gravitate towards Kim who, by this time had articulated Juche.

Importantly, however, Kim never claimed to have "invented" Juche. He was always careful to emphasize that it was born *through the decades-long anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle*.

The 1955 speech denounced formalism and dogmatism, or the idea that the tactics and policies of either the USSR or China should be copied in Korea. This is why he was so explicit in articulating Juche relative to Marxism-Leninism.

I think that these are the factors that contribute to Juche. It was born in the anti-colonial struggle and the partitioning of Korea. It's

11 Kim Il Sung, 'On eliminating dogmatism and formalism and establishing Juche in ideological work'.

sharpened in response to the attempted takeover of the WPRK, and then it's implemented to mobilize the party and the country to forge an independent path that would secure the country from intervention by larger socialist countries, who are both important allies to the DPRK. And there's another speech in 1965, which is when he explains Juche in practical terms. There are three principles, independence in politics, self-sufficiency in economic development, and self-reliance in terms of defense. He's calling it a realistic, creative, and independent interpretation of Marxism-Leninism (which should be redundant but unfortunately isn't). For Kim, it was a way of practicing Marxism-Leninism, not a "higher stage" of it. That said, it's of course evolved, and there was a notable shift after the overthrow of the Soviet Union.

MUSA: It's not a competing or combating ideology to Marxism-Leninism, it's more so a way to apply it. And even more specifically, one that was forged through decades of struggle, which is made to be applied to the Korean context and the Korean people's struggles. One of the things that I have heard and seen often in rooms with other communists, who are speaking about the Juche ideology, is that it's slightly too vague, meaning: it could mean anything at all. The idea of "man is the master of his destiny" is seen as too vague by a lot of people. And most of the people who I hear saying that are white Westerners. So, the concept of self-reliance is somewhat foreign to them. Having seen the Juche ideology firsthand structurally, being in the country, and watching it play out in real-time, do you have a different understanding?

DEREK: I do think so. I think many people across the world took inspiration from Juche and the DPRK's development, right? Che Guevara went to Pyongyang and said, "this is the model; Cuba should be looking at what they have done." Both Cuba and the DPRK placed special emphasis on education and maintaining the revolutionary spirit of the masses, arguing that it was this energy and creativity that was the

key to socialist construction.

When they built a Juche tower in DPRK around 1982, delegations from all over the world, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even the United States sent plaques that are still on display. The reason why they're studying Juche is because they're looking for an independent path. Juche is articulated as a refusal of dogmatism, as it doesn't make sense to import it mechanistically into another context. It worked. If you think about how much the DPRK has been able to withstand: they helped defeat Japanese imperialism, kicked the U.S. below the 38th parallel and in 1953, forced them to sign an armistice, survived the right-wing shift in China, survived the demise of the Soviet Union and the "Arduous March." Even today, you'll ask a question in the DPRK, and then they'll respond by just saying "Juche."

It's not a supernatural thing, but a common thread throughout history and politics, and a source of inspiration and pride. They reference it a lot, but we should refuse the colonial drive to *understand* or grasp it.

Think about it like this. When you have a unique experience with someone you can't quite articulate it 100 percent, that's what makes it unique. Later, something will remind you of it, and you look at each other and know exactly what they're thinking. Let me just end with this. On the last night, as is customary, we went out for dinner and karaoke. As the Korean comrades were getting ready to sing, they prepared us by saying: "this is our song; this is Juche." And wouldn't you know it, they start belting out—while holding back tears—Frank Sinatra's "I Did it My Way!"

MUSA: I think that another portion of it is that most of the criticisms on the left of the Juche ideology are extremely Western and U.S.-centric. There's a professor in Nigeria, Dr. Muhammad Abdullah, and he's actually been to the DPRK over 60 times in the last decade alone. And he's very set on keeping the Juche idea alive

and well in West Africa. And in speaking with him, I learned that all throughout the decolonial struggles that were taking place across Africa, the socialist and communist groups within West Africa, specifically, were receiving correspondence and aid from North Korea, and were very much involved with North Korean politics.

For example, in Burundi Korean engineers traveled there to help them build infrastructure. In Zimbabwe, Koreans helped train soldiers to fight off colonial leaders. All across Africa, for example, there was this connection and this reverence for the Juche idea. It resonates very deeply with other people who either were or still are trying to escape some kind of colonial stronghold exacerbated by the West. So, I certainly think that its "vagueness" is intelligible from a colonial mindset or a situation of domination that many people in the West simply don't get because they've never lived under those kinds of structures or standards. In speaking with Dr. Abdullah Muhammad, one of the things that he noted is that in his travels to the DPRK, the presence of soldiers and military personnel is abundant, but the relationship with them is vastly different than in almost any other country he's been to. In that, they're friendly and are actually working for the people and helping the people in their daily tasks. And they're not some separate, stratified entity that's just a violent force within the country. Did you notice something similar? Can you speak on that a little bit?

DEREK: It's true, and in fact the Korean People's Army specialists who provided training were key to the successful overthrow of the settler-colonial regime. One thing is you don't see any cops. I think I saw one police car the entire time I was there, except for like traffic cops. And traffic cops are like crossing guards. What they do is they blow their whistles, and they pull you over. We got pulled over once a day and it was astounding. What you do when you get pulled over is you get out of the car, and you go approach this traffic guard. One of our delegation members was a Black Cuban man from the

United States. And he was like, "whoa, I would never get out of my car" based on his experiences in the U.S.

MUSA: Even hearing that is just a foreign concept for me as a Black person.

DEREK: You see government cars get pulled over also, and they do the same thing. They aren't held above the law. They too were going too fast, or without windshield wipers on, or something like that. You see soldiers and the only reason you can tell that they're soldiers is because they have uniforms on. But oftentimes the uniforms are unbuttoned, because we were there in August, so it was hot. You see them engaged in construction projects and tilling the fields because an efficient way to coordinate large-scale production is to use the army. And the DPRK isn't waging war against any countries or occupying any countries, so what else are their soldiers going to do, other than prepare to defend the country and engage in production?

That's what's happening and you see evidence of it as they move amongst the people. The soldiers are always unarmed, and when they're walking around you can tell that they are no different than other people. No one cowers or moves to the other side of the street to avoid them or starts ensuring they are in proper dress or anything. Now, when you're walking down the street in the U.S. and you pass cops, you shut up, stop talking, look straight ahead, etc. But that doesn't happen in the DPRK with the soldiers. People joke with them. We even saw one woman slap a soldier in a playful interaction. People are very comfortable with the military because they're from the people, right? It's not as if there's an intense class or racial stratification where soldiers are drawn from one particular group and sent to repress another group. The dynamic is 100 percent different from the U.S. They're not trying to, like, intimidate people, by taking up as much space as possible or whatever, they're just moving and doing their thing. People are respectful of that, and they're respectful of the people; they are one body.

We were there right in August 2017, which is when Trump threatened to reign down “fire and fury” on the country. Hundreds of thousands of people went to sign up to volunteer for the army and people who had retired re-enlisted. The army is a central institution in daily life and the government. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union that devastated both the DPRK and Cuba, there were some large-scale natural disasters like droughts and tidal waves. The army was deployed during the “Arduous March.” The army was the sort of central institution that guided the country through that difficult period in terms of mobilizing production. The power has since shifted back away from the military towards the State and the civilian government. That was codified in the last party Congress of the WPK in a couple of important reassignments away from the military and towards civilian posts. People are proud of the military because it’s an important defense and agent in continuing to be independent and the continuing decolonial project in Korea.

MUSA: One of the things that is happening at the time of recording this episode is we’re seeing peace talks between the DPRK and South Korea. Now, from my understanding, based on speaking with various people who have been to the DPRK and speaking with actual North Koreans themselves, is that there isn’t animosity between the two different Koreas. It was essentially exacerbated by the U.S. And the U.S. has been the main party driving the wedge deeper and deeper at every chance it gets. I want to talk briefly about the language used inside of North Korea when discussing South Korea. Because what I’ve been told, they’re very aware that South Korea is an occupied body, occupied by the U.S. military, in an attack against the DPRK.

DEREK: Absolutely. In the DPRK, the South Korean government is known as a puppet government of the U.S. I would say the main thing that framed the narrative for the hundreds of North Korean people that I spoke to is that South Korea houses their brothers and sisters

who aren’t yet free. And if anything, they feel sorrow for people forced to *still* live under U.S. occupation. That’s the feeling; not animosity. Interestingly, when we went to the 38th parallel border, the U.S. troops knew we were coming, and they left so we would only see North Korean Soldiers on the Northern side of the parallel. After we left the border, one of the soldiers came back and got us. And he was like, “hey, come here,” and we followed him to see the U.S. troops coming back out as soon as we left.

And there’s always talk that Pyongyang wants to forcefully reunify the peninsula, but that’s actually not the case. What we were told is there needs to be a Federation, and before there’s complete unification, we need several decades of inter-Korean cooperation and a federalized system. I’ve been to both North and South and it breaks my heart to know that I have friends in the North and South who can’t go to the entirety of their country, even though I can. Or at least, until August 30th of September 1, 2017, I was able to go. Numerous differences developed through the division of the peninsula, but it’s still one nation, and its priority remains its peaceful reunification.

MUSA: I guess that’s a good segue into the last topic I want you to cover: the idea of “peaceful reunification.” I know that the DPRK does not have a first-strike policy anywhere in their constitution. Does it ever mention any kind of preemptive first-strike situation? Because you have Donald Trump in the U.S. Painting the country as this massive aggressor inches away from pressing the nuclear button. Is it just me, or is that very shallow representation false? Does it represent their military policies, whatsoever?

DEREK: No. The DPRK will say some bombastic things, but there’s always an “if.” *If* we are attacked, we do XYZ. It’s never that “we *will* XYX” because they are incredibly smart. If you think about the skill that it takes to manage the historical life of that country, there’s an incredible collective intelligence there, and it’s not a collective intelligence that would think that the DPRK

could beat the United States militarily. A war is the last thing that they want. The number one thing that they want is peace, but peace to them isn't having 30,000 U.S. troops occupying half of their country. The U.S. is the sole force preventing reunification, and the presence of U.S. bases in Japan and Guam and elsewhere, having nuclear-equipped and now nuclear submarines off their coast, that's what prevents peace: the U.S.

There is no animosity toward the *people* of the U.S. As someone who is a U.S. Citizen, a white guy with blonde hair who is pretty clearly not Korean, people there treated me with the utmost kindness, generosity, and respect, including, a survivor of a war crime committed by my government. In Sinchon, the U.S. took mothers and separated them from their children, locked them both in these caverns, poured gasoline on them, and lit them on fire. I met one of three survivors. When the attack happened, he was in a corner of the building, passed out, woke up several days later, and left. He was there and wanted to build our solidarity.

It's incredible to me, but completely normal, that the Korean people, throughout so much destruction and war that's been thrust upon them, have not lost any ounce of their humanity and are always extremely welcoming.

MUSA: I think that's a good place to end right there. I want to thank you so much for coming on. This has been a great talk. I think it will be very educational for everybody who is listening right now. Do you want to tell people how they can find your book?

DEREK: Yeah, sure. I'm on Twitter @derekrford, and that's probably the best way. You can find my latest book as a free high-quality PDF over at ISKRABOOKS.ORG.

MUSA: All right sounds good. Well, thank you, Derek. Have a good day.

DEREK: Thanks so much!

REFERENCES

- Clark, Joseph, 'Military Leaders Say Maintaining U.S. Strategic Edge Requires Continued Investment', *DODNews*, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3691100/military-leaders-say-maintaining-us-strategic-edge-requires-continued-investment/>, Feb 24th, 2024.
- Ford, Derek R. "Chongryon: The struggle of Koreans in Japan," in R. Park and C. York (eds.), *Socialist Education in Korea: Selected Writings of Kim Il-Sung*, 138-152 (Madison, Iskra Books: 2022), 138-152. Also available at <https://www.liberationschool.org/chongryon/>.
- Eliason, William T., 'An Interview with Anthony J. Cotton, *National Defense University Press*, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3678835/an-interview-with-anthony-j-cotton/>, Feb 15th, 2024.
- Li Yuk-sa. "Introduction," in Li (ed.), *Juche! The Speeches and Writings of Kim Il Sung*, 1-20 (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972).
- Kim Il Sung, 'On eliminating dogmatism and formalism and establishing Juche in ideological work', December 28, 1955, *Selected Works*, Vol. I, 582-606. (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971).
- Kim Il Sung with the Century (Vol. 4)* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1993).
- Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 'Chart Pack: Defense Spending', <https://www.pgpf.org/article/chart-pack-defense-spending/>
- Zorica, Pogrmić, and Bojan, Derčan. "Urban Development of Pyongyang under the Influence of Juche Idea." *Bulletin of the Serbian Geographical Society* 101, no. 2 (2021): 117-141.

